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SL Tribune

Grand Staircase-Escalante monument will be pruned by half, Hatch official says

Trump to announce monument reductions next month, but official fears “pingpong effect” if future presidents restore the current boundaries.

President Donald Trump will shrink the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument by about half, to 700,000 to 1.2 million acres, following the recommendation of his Interior secretary, according to a staffer for Sen. Orrin Hatch.

Ron Dean, Hatch’s central and eastern Utah director, revealed the potential magnitude of monument reductions Tuesday while fielding questions from the Utah Legislature’s Commission for the Stewardship of Public Lands.

He also confirmed Bears Ears National Monument will be redrawn in the range of 100,000 to 300,000 acres when the president visits Utah early next month. It’s currently 1.35 million acres.

But Dean cautioned that any monument reduction could be fleeting since a future president could reverse whatever action Trump takes.

Absent changes to the Antiquities Act, according to Dean, Hatch foresees “a pingpong effect” where executive actions by subsequent presidents restore these monument boundaries or even enlarge them.

Trump’s action to reduce Utah’s two monuments will be based on recommendations by Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, whom the president instructed to review 27 large monuments designated mostly by Presidents Bill Clinton and Barack Obama under the Antiquities Act.

In a leaked memo, Zinke did not recommend revoking any monuments, but he did urge the president to reduce Grand Staircase, Bears Ears and two other Western national monuments. His specific recommendations, however, remain under wraps despite widespread calls for their release to the public.

Dean said he has not seen Zinke’s proposed monument changes, but was confident the acreage ranges he provided are accurate.

“If [Trump’s] announcement is outside those parameters, my rumors are bad rumors,” said Dean, arguing that presidents have authority to adjust monument boundaries proclaimed by predecessors.

“There have been multiple instances of monuments being enlarged or shrunk, sometimes in substantial ways,” he said.

Dean's report to state lawmakers is based on what Trump has told Hatch, one of the Senate's most powerful members, whose support would help the president advance his legislative agenda regarding tax reform and financing a wall along the Mexican border.

Earlier this week, Zinke told The Salt Lake Tribune he counseled the president to severely reduce Bears Ears, but keep it bigger than Bryce Canyon and Arches national parks combined. That means at least 180,000 acres.

Zinke's recommendations are expected to align with what state and local leaders requested for the two Utah monuments. For a reduced Bears Ears, Utah officials drew a 120,000-acre oval stretching from Bears Ears Buttes to the Butler Wash ruin and submitted the map to the Interior Department.

Proposals for a redrawn Grand Staircase was left to Kane County leaders. They presented their map while meeting with Zinke on May 10, during the secretary's multi-day swing through Utah, according to County Attorney Robert Van Dyke. Yet the county has rejected The Tribune's public records request for that and many other maps it prepared in its push to reduce the 1.9-million-acre monument Clinton proclaimed as he was running for re-election in 1996.

That map indicated two areas local officials believe would be appropriately protected as national monuments, according to Van Dyke's presentation at the State Records Committee Nov. 9, where he tried to fend off The Tribune's appeal. One would be the Escalante Canyons in Garfield County, and the other would be a slice of Kane County between Paria and Cottonwood washes.

Dubbed "Heart of the Monument" because the outline is shaped like a heart, this area is just south of Kodachrome Basin State Park and includes Hackberry Canyon, but leaves out numerous world-class hiking destinations as well as much of Kaiparowits Plateau, which holds abundant coal deposits.

The Record Committee found that the county had properly classified the maps as protected drafts, but ordered the one shown to Zinke and several other maps be released, concluding that disclosure served the public interest. The county has until Dec. 9 days to contemplate an appeal to district court.